

DAVID LOADER questions whether a 'one size fits all' approach to schooling meets the needs of Australian students, and proposes more experimentation with the curriculum and an increased investment in specialist schools.

Who says 'One size fits all'?

I've always been a critic of 'look-alike' Australian schools offering average mediocrity in education and have never believed that the education wanted by upwardly-mobile eastern suburb people is the same as that wanted by inner-city working class or rural communities. Nor have I believed that students, even from the one family, want the same education as each other. A 'one size fits all' approach to schooling is not the answer.

This is not to argue for a lower standard for one group over another, rather, to assert that what interests and is relevant to different individuals or groups will be different. A different curriculum does not have to mean different standards, but it can mean added interest and encouragement to serious study by our students when they become more engaged in their schooling. Nor in criticising our comprehensive schools am I saying that we cannot have a core curriculum for all students. To the contrary, to fail to achieve minimum standards of literacy, numeracy, technology and personal skills is to fail students and that is the greatest cause of inequality in Australian society. But there's a world of difference between a minimum common core curriculum and a commitment that all schools offer the same curriculum.

We have inherited comprehensive schools as a result of our commitment to equality of opportunity. Such dedication to equality is laudable, but the fear of difference that we bring to this quest is detrimental to individuals and to society. One of our strengths is our multiculturalism, yet while there is general agreement in our community that diversity means richness when we are talking about restaurants, there is not the same positive feeling about differences when it comes to culture, customs and different schools. Australians fear change and resist permitting differences of school practice. This fear is found, surprisingly, even amongst those who acknowledge that our present school system is failing too many students.

We have not been alone in our commitment to sameness and mediocrity. The United Kingdom has pursued a policy of universal comprehensive schooling, believing that it offered the only way to deliver equality. The British system was driven by the fear of 'elitism' and, sure, in the days when access to grammars or secondary moderns depended on the exam performance of eleven-year olds that fear was justified. That stratified system meant there were students who made it and others who failed before even commencing secondary school.

Now, the Labour government of Tony Blair is arguing that equality will only come when schools are set free and allowed to be different. Hooray for the wisdom and pluck of Tony and his team! They argue that allowing schools to choose a speciality

schools are set free to specialise. And there is something else for Australians to imitate. To achieve change, the UK Labour government is investing six per cent of GDP over and above inflation for each of the next three years, providing, amongst other commitments, for the doubling of specialist schools from 1,000 to 2,000.

We do, in fact, have some specialist schools in Australia that have built a reputation for music, languages, technology, even sport. But these are the exception and some ideologues see them as an aberration in the system. Let's not just tolerate but praise these specialist schools and encourage the look-alikes to differentiate themselves. Let's see more experimentation with curriculum. Are we so sure that what we do at present is correct? When I first proposed taking a term out of

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increases the motivation and performance of teachers and students not just in the speciality but also across the rest of the curriculum. In a speech to the Tenth Annual Conference of the Technology Colleges Trust Blair said, 'The evidence is clear that (speciality status) serves as a whole-school improvement strategy... Schools that do well are the schools with a distinctive ethos, effective leadership, flexibility in working and adapting to change... And the more choice there is for parents, the more pressure for change and improvement in the system... Excellence is not the enemy of equality but ultimately its instrument.'

The British Labour government seeks excellence and equality by encouraging differences in schools, believing that the evidence exists from student and school failure that existing comprehensive schools are not delivering. What they want is school initiative, variety and relevance in offerings and quality that they believe follows when

the curriculum in Year Nine at MLC so that students could attend a residential program, there were cries of despair from many subject teachers who claimed they needed more time with students in class, not less, yet there was no loss of academic achievement at Year Twelve. The interruption to academic classes actually enhanced student results.

Students are not all of the same ability, nor do students and their parents have the same interests, nor is equality delivered by uniformity of experience. The evidence is that uniformity creates inequality because students reject schooling and fail at school. Let's create many different schools where students and their interests are nurtured and extended. ■

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